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THE MARIAGE DE CONVENANCE IN FRANCE.

There can be little doubt that among the highly-civilised countries, France is one of those that lag furthest behind in the matter of the relations of the sexes. But it is one thing to pass such a judgment, and quite another to rate it at its proper value in a general estimate of the comparative advancement of the different leading races. By some critics of French life and manners the point is often pressed unjustly owing to a lack of discrimination; by others it is dealt with too lightly, because its full significance is not realised. It may be worth while to look into the matter a little more closely than is commonly done.

The admitted laxity of morals in France is misunderstood when it is taken to imply a universal acquiescence in breaches of the law and spirit of monogamy. There is unquestionably a body of public opinion there, not yet large, but steadily increasing, and of special weight from its authority, which is in substantial accord with the mass of sentiment among ourselves as to the inviolability of marriage and all that it implies. Various causes, not all discreditable, have helped to obscure this fact. The French are much more candid and fearless in facing realities than we are, and scorn the hypocritical homage which we love to see vice paying to virtue. Their exaggerated tolerance for a degree of outspokenness that often amounts to cynical bravado is naturally misleading, but we must learn to take it with a proper discount. The tone of their comic papers and their novels gives evidence of a sad deficiency of good taste in the moral sphere, but it is not to be accepted too seriously as a reflection of the prevailing feeling and practice.

The moral laxity is misunderstood again by those who see in it only a survival of the primitive contempt for women, as inferior creatures existing mainly for the use and pleasure of men, such as still exists in Germany, in spite of the traditional Teutonic regard for feminine virtue, and forms a serious hindrance to further social progress in that country. In France there is no department of life where women do not count for a great deal, and it is remarkable that a professed disbelief in the inviolability of their chastity involves no general disrespect

for their nature, or lack of appreciation of their influence. There is more hope for a nation that sins through lack of restraint, than for one that is righteous, but has not the saving grace of insight into the possibilities of progress that lie in securing for women their proper status.

On the other hand the position is equally misunderstood by those who fail to see how closely the state of sexual morality in France is bound up with other features of the national character, and how much that is unfortunate in the social condition of the people is to be set down rather to the presence of outworn and mischievous conventions than to ineradicable faults of temperament. Let us examine one of these historic conventions,—the so-called *mariage de convenance*,—which is responsible for a great deal more than is at once apparent, though in its turn it is of course to be explained in its relation to other factors. If we can analyse the forces that have determined the prevailing sentiment of the French people in regard to the union of the sexes, and distinguish the subtle influences on character and manners to which it has given birth, we shall have gone far to explain the leading features in the life of present-day France.

It may be objected that the expression "*mariage de convenance*" is too indefinite to bear so much stress, and that the institution is not much more characteristic of France than of other countries that profess what they consider to be a higher ideal. It is enough for the present purpose, however, to assume what can scarcely be denied,—that in France it is only a minority of marriages that are determined by mutual inclination, and that the proportion of such marriages is smaller there than in any other country of equal status. It is also quite unnecessary, of course, to assume that the marriages arranged on what we should consider irrelevant grounds are on that account usually unhappy, or that the love matches which our public sentiment approves invariably lead to unmitigated bliss. It is in no way to the purpose to urge that domestic wellbeing is often more certainly secured when regard is paid mainly to considerations of fortune and social connections, than when the decision rests entirely on personal fancy. The Anglo-Saxon ideal as to selection in marriage, which is contrasted with the

French, does not, except in the sentimental exaggeration of protest, exalt the first amorous flutter of inexperienced youth into a sign from heaven; it lays ample stress on the need for deliberation, for calm judgment, for extent of choice. The difference is simply that we believe in mutual attraction as the prime condition of a successful union, and try to secure indirectly the social guarantees that form so useful a support, whereas in France it is the prudential outlook that takes the first place, and is definitely and directly provided for, while what is considered the romantic element is looked upon with little more than tolerance, as a kind of fifth wheel to the coach. The proud satisfaction with which French parents will sometimes tell you that their daughter's marriage was one of inclination, may be the presage of a change in public feeling, but it is also a clear proof of the wide prevalence of the traditional attitude.

But although the *mariage de convenience* has all the appearance of a social institution that has been consciously created to secure a definite end, it has evidently, like most other national customs, a historical explanation in the blind struggle of primitive instincts. Any justification of it that may now be offered is to be taken as an *ex post facto* defense, not as a rational account of its origin. It is in no sense, what it sometimes professes to be, a chosen means of consolidating family life in the interests alike of the present and of future generations; it is simply a device for the distribution of property, and whatever subsidiary ends it may have been made to serve, the impulse with which it stands in closest relation is the desire of gain. There is no need to paint this motive in very dark colors. It does not often reach the point of avarice, and it may be no more than a reasonable self-regard. But let the fact be faced that marriage in France turns more upon questions of money than of affection. Perhaps the situation may be summed up fairly in saying that while we ask for love first and as many favorable material conditions as possible afterwards, the French prefer to make sure of the material fitness first, and welcome as a gratuitous amenity whatever degree of love may discover itself.

It may be granted that certain collateral effects of this view of marriage are in some aspects at least worthy of respect. The acknowledged duty of providing a sufficient *dot* for their daughters calls for considerable self-denial on the part of the parents, and is commonly fulfilled in an admirable spirit; and the independent position which is thus secured for their children seems to be an end worth striving for. But even this apparently laudable endeavor has its seamy side. In many households the effort to lay aside money from the earliest years, which may or may not be needed for marriage portions, entails a sacrifice that scarcely any later benefits could outweigh. The whole family life is narrowed, the parents are overworked, and the young people may be deprived of advantages of nurture and education which would have been of more value to them in after life than the money that would have made these possible. Moreover, there is a serious indirect evil that is caused by the institution of the *dot* as a matter of conventional necessity. There are cases where it is impossible to provide it, and girls are practically shut out from marriage through no fault of their own. The individual injustice and hardship of these cases might be disregarded, if the evil went no farther, but it is a grave social misfortune not only that the range of choice should be artificially restricted, but that the question of eligibility should be so explicitly associated with pecuniary considerations.

It is not enough then to term the *mariage de convenance* a prudential arrangement; it must be frankly recognised as materialistic in its origin and in its effects. Some of these effects are direct and obvious; others are more subtle and far-reaching. There is no need to dwell on the necessary instability of a marriage tie that has been formed without regard to the guarantee of mutual attraction. Nearly the whole of modern French drama and fiction finds the material of its tragedy,—and too often, alas, of its comedy also,—in the breaking of such fragile bonds. Though the scenes with which we are made so familiar in books and on the stage are not to be taken as bulking so largely in the national life as their writers would lead us to believe, there is at least a serious danger even in the artistic

representation *ad nauseam* of unedifying situations. The spectacle of the passion of love in inevitable antagonism to the claims of duty, to the emotions that consecrate the home and safeguard the highest interests of the generation that is to succeed the present,—such a spectacle, offered without reserve or qualification, does grievous harm to the nation that permits it. It may be a small matter that it should suffer thereby in its reputation with other nations, though such a gratuitous loss of sympathy should not be lightly borne, but it is a terrible pity that what the best people in France hold to be the chief shame of the country should be continually held up to its youth as the main source of emotional interest.

The picture, moreover, though exaggerated, is in the main not unfaithful to reality. It is impossible to know in how many French homes the children are brought up in an atmosphere where there is perfect constancy and confidence between the parents, and in how many cases irresponsible passion usurps the place of hallowed love, preventing or disturbing the family affections which are the foundation of all other virtues; but a judgment may be formed, with a sufficient degree of certainty, from the tone of public opinion in regard to all the social arrangements that affect the relations of the sexes. If the stage and the press are not wholly trustworthy as reflections of general feeling, at least we may rely on the evidence of such an institution as the accepted system of education. It is here that there is really to be traced the most baneful effects of the belief in the *mariage de convenience*, which casts a dark shadow backwards across all the years of youth. The evil of this particular effect is not generally recognised, but it forms the chief hindrance to any advance either in opinion or in practice. Children are brought up with a view to their being eventually married under a mercenary scheme of selection, and the character of such an upbringing inevitably tends to perpetuate the tendencies and traditions that make it so difficult to substitute a higher ideal. It is not easy to see what point of this vicious circle can be most fruitfully attacked. Probably the reform should begin at both ends, but it is always more profitable to bring influence to bear on the young than on the old. Unfortunately in this

case the children can be directly reached only through their parents. When the French people can be convinced how greatly the strength—perhaps even the safety—of their national life depends on the well-being and stability of individual homes, how imperative it is that the coming generations should be nurtured in the fullest enjoyment of all the family affections, they will no doubt give some thought to remodeling their ideas of early education. On the other hand, if the traditions of this education can be attacked from outside, and a more reasonable practice imposed, which the parents can be persuaded or induced to accept, there is good hope that a generation would grow up whose natural instincts would rebel against the current materialistic view of marriage, and who would insist, for their children if not for themselves, on taking full account of the promptings of mutual inclination in forming the permanent ties of life.

The mischief is centered in the practice of sending children away from home even in the earliest years. The upbringing of girls in convents had no doubt originally a quasi-religious motive, but it has been used for centuries simply as a convenient means of seclusion, by which the daughters of the household could be kept most securely from the chance of any connection that might interfere with the parents' plans for their future. In the case of boys the boarding-house system had a military rather than an ecclesiastical origin, but it matters little whether the discipline be that of a barracks or a monastery; the practical effect is to isolate brothers from their sisters, and from all other family influences, for the greater part of their youth. Though our own country has not kept wholly free from the same grave error, we are at least alive to the dangers it involves in the extreme form that it has taken in France. There is no need now to dwell at length on the results of an artificial separation of the sexes during the critical years of adolescence. If the desired ignorance, which is mistaken for innocence, can be preserved till the world must be entered, the youths and maidens, who have had no training in schooling their feelings and behavior under the stress of sexual attraction, are then in the worst possible position to face the difficulties that present themselves.

The revulsion of instincts that have been unduly repressed will drive them towards extravagances, and even if the choice of partners for life were left to themselves, there is but a small chance that the decision would be wisely considered. In such cases a selection by the parents may often be the less of two evils, but in any event there can be no good prospect of a stable union. The mischief has already been done, in the neglect of the priceless opportunities of accustoming girls and boys to grow up together, with mutual understanding and respect, in the natural environment of a family circle. Where, on the other hand, the monastic upbringing fails to secure the desired ignorance, as is generally the case, the evils that attend the removal of authority will only be intensified. Those who marry without due warrant in genuine attachment and in preparation, are supported by public opinion in taking their legal bonds lightly, and giving free rein to inclinations that they have never been taught to control.

It is customary to account for the comparatively low standard of sexual morality in France by referring to the insufficiently-controlled sensibility of a Southern temperament. It is no doubt true that the warm blood of the Latin races has encouraged a tradition of greater license than could be claimed in excuse for the colder natures bred in Northern Europe, and while our judgment of French manners and sentiment in these matters must be uncompromising in relation to the ultimate ideal, it is only just to make full allowance for the stress of stronger temptations than we probably have to withstand. Let there be no question of our thanking God that in this respect we are not as our neighbors are across the channel. Every race must work out its own salvation, and if criticism is offered from outside, it should be based less on a comparison of one nation with another than on the possibilities of progress that are disclosed in the form of civilisation that is under review. France has no need to borrow ideals from other lands. In this as in other matters there are many within its borders who bear aloft the torch of a high morality, and who seek, with more ardor than any foreigner can pretend to feel, to lead their countrymen to what they believe to be a loftier plane of con-

duct. It would savor of self-righteous impertinence to hold up an Anglo-Saxon example to those who have no less exalted a vision than we can have, of the heights that may be attained in pursuing the true monogamic ideal, and of the regenerating influence that such an attainment would bring to bear on all other forms of social life. One may even hazard the opinion that a higher destiny in this regard may be awaiting France than is likely to be reached by other nations that now pride themselves on their advancement. If sensibility to the influence of women does not necessarily guarantee them a position of dignity, it is at least the foundation on which the fullest respect can alone be based, and in this respect, as has been said, there is good promise for the future of the French people, in their pre-eminent appreciation of the *rôle* that women may play in almost every department of life. But though the outside critic may well hesitate to preach an ideal to France which is already cherished by its best thinkers and teachers, it is permissible to draw attention to certain of their institutions that seem to interfere with progress, in ways that perhaps strike the foreigner more forcibly than those to whom they have become almost a matter of course. There are features in our methods of bringing up children that the French have recently begun to admire, and are seeking to imitate. Advantage may be taken of this attitude to make certain suggestions in matters that are of even greater moment than the encouragement of athletics, though in so far as this latter movement may prevent an unhealthy emotional precocity, it also is not without value from the present point of view.

It may be said, however, that the seclusion and surveillance of the young, which has been accounted for by the artificial method of arranging marriages in France, is now a thing of the past. It is fortunately true that in recent years the tradition has to some extent broken down, and that its effects are no longer to be seen in such extreme forms. We do not now hear of girls being sent to a convent at the age of two, to remain there with hardly any intercourse with their families till they are taken away at sixteen or seventeen to be rushed into a marriage with someone they have never seen. There are cases

even yet not very far removed from this, but let it be granted that they are rare. The *régime* of the convent has largely passed away, and in the strict sense it will disappear still more rapidly in the future. Much of this healthy change is due to the initiative of the State, in founding schools for girls that have much more the character of day-schools than of boarding establishments. It is satisfactory to find also that in the boys' *lycées* the numbers of those sent to board is steadily diminishing in proportion to those who come daily from their homes. But with all these hopeful signs of a better practice there remains a great deal to be done, before it can be said that the best conditions of upbringing, alike in the home and in the school, have been secured both for boys and for girls, so that they may be trained with neither too much nor too little guidance to grow into the proper relations with each other. Parents have still to learn that an unobtrusive watchfulness and an indirect control form the most effective, if not indeed the only admissible, means of influencing their children's conduct, in regard to the relations of the sexes as in other relations of life, as soon as they reach the age of reason. School authorities have still to learn that an attitude of suspicion is sure to defeat its own ends, by encouraging the surreptitious use of opportunities that cannot be supervised, in ways that would not occur to those who were trusted with a fuller responsibility. As long as the majority of French parents who have it in their power think it advisable that their children should be constantly in charge of someone, not only in the streets and in the class-room, but even in their playtime, for fear of what they might possibly say to each other, or of any unauthorized friendships they might form, so long will they expose themselves to being outwitted in what they wish to avert, and to laying up a store of future troubles even when their efforts are successful. Nothing but approval can be given to the solicitude that seeks to provide the children with suitable companionship, but this is not to be done by autocratic methods under the impulse of an essentially worldly motive. Friendship cannot be forced at any age; the only safe guarantee is a wide selection and freedom of choice. If children have been wisely brought up under the influences of a

healthy family life, they may be trusted to conduct themselves reasonably in relation to so much of the outer world as they encounter in the school, or in the home companionship of their brothers' and sisters' friends. This free intercourse among young people is as yet very largely wanting in France, and its absence is to be held responsible for many of the most serious evils in the national life.

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CARLYLE'S ETHICS.

We are wont to think of Carlyle more often as a moral teacher than as a historian or a writer on literary subjects. As historian or essayist alone, he might perhaps be superseded or fall into neglect; as a moral philosopher, it is scarcely conceivable that he should not permanently occupy a high place in English literature and have a wide influence upon readers. Yet a close examination of his moral doctrines reveals striking deficiencies as well as peculiarities. He has enunciated his ideas with tremendous vigor, a clearness that never leaves uncertain the meaning of any sentence or paragraph, and with wearisome iteration; yet he has nowhere reduced them to any system, nor sought to establish them on a secure metaphysical basis; and at times even their practical application remains in doubt. He was impatient of any attempt to "justify the ways of God to men." His moral convictions were ingrained, and suffered no essential change—a characteristic rare among great thinkers—during the whole course of his literary activity. An expression of "Sartor Resartus" or of "Friedrich" is equally authentic as an expression of his permanent belief and doctrine. His attitude toward literature and literary art altered remarkably as the sense of the earnestness of life bore with increasing weight upon him; his hopefulness disappeared, his denunciation became more vigorous and unrestrained; but his perception of duty and its sanction was the same from first to last.

The analyst of character finds much in the influences of